



Life in the Desert



James Down drives around Namibia and discovers his favourite guestfarms and lodges and realises that despite first appearances, there is a great deal of life in the Namib Desert – you just have to know where to look...

The tracks were unmistakable, tiny footprints that scuttled across the sand. Close by was at least one Dancing White Lady, an evocatively named spider that rests during the heat of the day beneath the sands of the Namib Desert before venturing out at night. The tracks stopped at the entrance to a tiny hole and Mark, our guide, carefully enticed her out. Shy and withdrawn and curled up into a ball it was only as she unfurled herself in the palm of his hand that we were able to view her full size and beautiful colours. Before our eyes, was proof that the Namib Desert, one of the most inhospitable places on earth, was alive with hardy creatures if you just knew where to look.

A vast country of open spaces and big skies, Namibia has arguably more variation in scenery than any of its neighbours, ranging from the dramatic dunes at Sossusvlei to the lush green waterways of the Caprivi Strip. In the last few years the infrastructure for visitors has been improving rapidly and Namibia now offers exciting travel options for all levels of budget. On my recent trip there I found that self-driving is one of the best ways to travel and I discovered many excellent family-run eco-lodges, friendly guest farms and incredible walking trails.

The first gem I discovered was the homely guest farm, Büllsport, which is located in the beautiful Naukluft Mountains, the perfect location to break your journey between Windhoek and Sossusvlei. Büllsport is run by Johanna and Ernst who have lived and worked on the farm for years (Ernst grew up here). From here you can set out on foot or on horseback to search for mountain zebra, kudu, dik diks, baboons and more. After a day of activities you return to a hearty dinner of farmhouse cooking served around the family table or in front of the fire in the boma.

One of my favourite places was the Tok Tokkie trail, where I encountered the Dancing White Lady spider and other desert adapted wildlife. These trails run by Mark Durr, are located in the NamibRand Nature Reserve, a stunningly beautiful area of desert landscapes. Trekking on foot we saw many species of flora and fauna easily missed from a vehicle; barking geckos, flightless wasps, horned adders, dune crickets, ant lions as well as larger creatures like oryx, impala and bat-eared foxes. At night I slept on a camp bed with just my snug duvet between me and the stars.

In the colonial town of Swakopmund on the wild Atlantic coast, I came across one of the most imaginatively designed guesthouses in Namibia. The Stiltz has a fantastic location, overlooking the ocean, on a lagoon area that attracts a myriad of sea birds. The Stiltz's unique charm is in its quirky chalets, each hand built by the owner on high wooden stilts. From the lodge there are numerous activities to be enjoyed from dramatic 4WD trips down to Sandwich Harbour to kayaking within the Walvis Bay lagoon amongst the playful seals.

From Swakopmund I travelled further north to the Palmwag region of Damaraland, where I stayed at Etendeka, a superb family-run eco-camp comprising of ten tents which generates its energy through impressive solar panels. Around the lodge, eroded ancient basalt forms a dramatic landscape of flat-topped hills and plains strewn with weathered boulders. Etendeka's guide Bonnie takes guests on nature walks and drives to search for the desert elephants and rhino that often pass nearby.

In so many parts of the world hotels and lodges have a soulless uniformity. With so many wonderfully unique properties and stunning experiences to be had that Namibia is so high on many travellers' lists.



Damaraland Road Sign

FACT FILE

A 14 day self-drive trip to Namibia including flights, car hire and time at Büllsport, Tok Tokkie Trails, the Stiltz and Etendeka costs from £2,500 per person. For details please contact James, Tor or Roger on 01993 838 525.

